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Oral History and Reminiscence Therapy: Preserving Elderly Narratives at Wisma Harapan Asri in Semarang City

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Abstract: This article discusses the integration of oral history and memory therapy as a community service approach for elderly people at the Harapan Asri Nursing Home in Semarang, Central Java. The project was carried out by the History Department of Diponegoro University in 2025, with the aim of preserving local wisdom and empowering elderly people through the documentation of their personal narratives. Using participatory methods, the team conducted in-depth interviews with the elderly, focusing on their memories and experiences related to social changes in Semarang over the past half-century. The case study of Mr Irwan, a 79-year-old resident of Chinese descent, provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by minority communities during periods of political turmoil. The memory sessions not only served as a source of oral history but also provided psychological benefits for the	Abstrak: Artikel ini mengkaji integrasi antara sejarah lisan dan terapi kenangan sebagai pengabdian kepada masyarakat bagi lansia di Panti Jompo Harapan Asri, Semarang, Jawa Tengah. Proyek yang dilakukan oleh Departemen Sejarah Universitas Diponegoro pada tahun 2025 ini bertujuan untuk melestarikan kebijaksanaan lokal dan memberdayakan lansia melalui pendokumentasian narasi pribadi mereka. Dengan menggunakan metode partisipatif, tim melakukan wawancara mendalam dengan lansia, berfokus pada kenangan dan pengalaman mereka terkait perubahan sosial di Semarang selama setengah abad terakhir. Studi kasus Bapak Irwan, seorang penghuni berusia 79 tahun keturunan Tionghoa, memberikan wawasan berharga tentang tantangan yang dihadapi komunitas minoritas selama periode gejolak politik. Sesi kenangan tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai sumber sejarah lisan tetapi juga memberikan
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elderly participants, helping them to restructure their identities and foster a sense of pride in their life journeys. This article highlights the potential of oral history as a tool for social and emotional empowerment, as well as its role in enriching local historical narratives. Our conclusion is that it is necessary to integrate psychological and sociological perspectives into the oral history framework to understand the complex experiences of marginalised individuals and communities. This study demonstrates the value of an interdisciplinary approach in community service initiatives and emphasises the importance of preserving the collective memory of the elderly.

Keywords: Oral History; Elderly; Wisma Asri; Semarang.

manfaat psikologis bagi peserta lansia, membantu mereka merestrukturisasi identitas mereka dan menumbuhkan rasa bangga terhadap perjalanan hidup mereka. Artikel ini menyoroti potensi sejarah lisan sebagai alat pemberdayaan sosial dan emosional, serta perannya dalam memperkaya narasi sejarah lokal. Kesimpulan yang kami dapat adalah perlunya mengintegrasikan perspektif psikologis dan sosiologis dalam kerangka sejarah lisan, guna memahami pengalaman yang kompleks dari individu dan komunitas yang termarjinalkan. Studi ini menunjukkan nilai pendekatan interdisipliner dalam inisiatif pelayanan masyarakat, dan menekankan pentingnya melestarikan memori kolektif lansia.

Kata Kunci: Sejarah Lisan; Lansia; Wisma Asri; Semarang.

A. Introduction

Community service based on the historical paradigm approach has tended to focus on archival training and strengthening scientific historical research models (Baihaqi, 2025). The authors consider community service using a historical and psychosocial approach as a form of therapy for elderly people who have long been immersed in the flow of history to be quite rare. This became the turning point for our community service, which was based on in-depth interviews (*deep talk*) but with a psychosocial approach. According to Jo Maynes, the effectiveness of historians lies in using a psychosocial approach as therapy for the elderly in remembering (*reminiscing*) their glory days (Mary Jo Maynes, 2008).

Meanwhile, the group that was the subject of the oral history interview was a foundation engaged in the care of vulnerable elderly people, of which there are not

many in the city of Semarang. There are approximately 10 foundations managed by private entities and one owned by the Social Services Agency (Hariyadi, 19/09/2022). The Harapan Asri Elderly Care Home Foundation is one of the private elderly care facilities in the Tusam area of Banyumanik. Geographically, this area is a commuting zone for academics in Semarang City who wish to live comfortably (Yuliati, 2009). Sociologically, humanising the elderly is a social necessity to at least maintain their social cognitive functions. Several approaches are taken to maintain their mental and cognitive health so that they can continue to think optimally. Reminiscence, or recalling the glorious events of the elderly's past, is one way to treat their mental health regarding their past to a large audience through oral history methods (Portelli, 2018).

The history of elderly parents, which can then be recounted through oral history methods, can be a meaningful and satisfying process. This is because it captures their personal narratives and preserves them for future generations through oral history methods (Sibarani, 2012). Oral history refers to the method of collecting, preserving, and interpreting the voices and memories of individuals, communities, and participants in past events. This method is increasingly recognised as an important tool for studying modern history, providing insights into personal experiences and perspectives that may not be recorded in written documents. This method involves interviews in which the subjectivity of the narrator becomes a significant historical fact, creating a shared narrative space between the interviewer and the narrator (Portelli, 2018).

Oral history is a technique that can be used to gather knowledge. The purpose of oral history writing assistance in community service journals is to document and preserve the collective memory of the community through planned interviews, as well as to publish the results of these activities to be used as knowledge, examples, and solutions to problems in the community (Clifford, 1995). For many indigenous communities, oral history serves as a key mechanism for passing on language, cultural knowledge, politics, and identity between generations. It is not merely regarded as a

collection of myths or superstitions, but as a valid historical record that is conveyed orally in various forms and practices (Mahuika, 2019).

Oral history transcends written tradition, challenging and expanding Western-centric views of historical documentation by affirming indigenous methods of knowledge transmission (Kartodirdjo, 1992). Academically, oral history provides a rich field for exploring various theoretical approaches such as subjectivity, intersubjectivity, memory, narrative, performance, and power dynamics. It combines academic study with practitioner observation and includes examples of oral history globally, making it a valuable resource for both experienced historians and new students in the discipline (Maynes, 2009).

In the context of education, oral storytelling can improve children's literacy and narrative comprehension skills, especially in preserving cultural heritage practices. The integration of oral storytelling in the classroom has been shown to improve the quality of teachers' language input and support the development of children's narrative skills. Oral history, therefore, serves as a powerful academic and cultural tool, capable of preserving traditions, providing personal insights into historical events, and promoting cultural understanding and empathy in educational settings (Gilbert, 1971; Lloyd, 1993). The community service project we are planning this time is for the Harapan Asri Tusam Banyumanik Elderly Care Home Foundation. This institution, which is one of the social pillars for pre-elderly and elderly people, is a place that has received little attention from scholars in the field of culture, especially history. The urgency of this community service is to preserve the memories of the past of the pre-elderly who are often discriminated against by their immediate families. Strengthening nostalgia and historical memories of the past is expected to be a force that reduces social dysfunction in the underprivileged elderly group (Clifford, 1995).

This model of community service in the form of documentation and analysis of life experiences has received little attention from young historians. As they grow older and the end of their lives approaches, a reminiscence approach to remembering

individual memories is very important in viewing sources of social and cultural history. The residents, whose average age is 60-80 years old or even older, are witnesses to the social changes in Indonesia, especially in the city of Semarang, over the past half century. This activity is not only positive as a historical source but also has a psychological impact on the elderly (Hariyadi, 19/09/2022; Irwan, 2025).

Oral history writing has become an important approach in reconstructing the social experiences of communities that are not recorded in written archives (Toynbee, 1974). In the context of community service, oral history has a dual role: as a source of historical documentation and as a means of psychological empowerment for the elderly. At Wisma Harapan Asri Banyumanik, Semarang City, this activity focuses on the process of remembering (resimineness) as a form of social therapy and a medium for preserving collective memory. In-depth interviews were conducted with one of the residents, Mr Irwan, who provided valuable testimony about the social and cultural changes in Semarang since his youth. This activity is part of an effort to turn personal memories into historical heritage that can enrich our understanding of the dynamics of local communities (Irwan, 2025).

The novelty (*state of the art*) of this article lies in the integration of oral history methods and the resimineness approach in the context of local history of the elderly in the social pillar environment of the Asri elderly home. This approach not only produces micro- historical documentation, but also opens up space for social intervention that strengthens the welfare of the elderly (Mahuika, 2019). Several points of novelty include: *first*, the application of *oral history* as a reflective medium for the elderly. *Second*, the use of remembrance activities as a participatory method in community service. And *third*, the compilation of historical narratives based on individual life experiences as part of the collective memory of the community (Gilbert, 1971).

B. Method

In planning the implementation of community service, the methods used were observation and active participation, which took place in several stages of activity. The activity began with observing the Asri Elderly Home Foundation on Jalan Tusam Banyumanik, both in the field and through social media, to see the potential that could be explored. Then, we coordinated with the Head of the Asri Elderly Home Foundation to make an agreement or collaboration to become the venue for the community service that we had planned as proposed. On 15 September 2025, we had another audience and were welcomed by nurses who would accompany the interview process with the elderly. We then coordinated with the leadership of the UP3 Faculty of Cultural Sciences at Diponegoro University to submit a proposal for the activity, followed by the formation of a community service team in collaboration with three undergraduate students from the History programme at the Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Diponegoro University.

Figure 1.

Meeting with the Management of the Harapan Asri Elderly Home Foundation



Oral history and reminiscence therapy are closely related as a form of historical therapy with psychological benefits (Maynes, 2009). Therefore, we conducted interviews to elevate the status of the elderly using the main techniques of oral history and reminiscence therapy (Gottschalk, 1986). The activity was carried out at Wisma

Harapan Asri, Banyumanik, Semarang City, from late August to mid-September 2025 in several stages. The main source was Mr Irwan, aged 79, of Chinese descent from Jakarta, who had extensive experience of social change from the Old Order, New Order to post-Reformation (Irwan, 2025). Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and reflective notes. The interview transcripts were then analysed thematically to find patterns of meaning in the informant's memories. A narrative validation approach was used to ensure the accuracy of the information by reconfirming it with the informant.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Overview of the Service Location

As sources for oral history writing, they are generally elderly citizens who have a high sense of nostalgia. They have a treasure trove of memories and historical experiences to recall these valuable stories. In this case, we found a group of elderly people at the Harapan Asri Elderly Home, located in the highlands of Jalan Tusam, Banyumanik, Semarang City (Hariyadi, 19/09/2022). Demographically, Banyumanik Subdistrict is located in the highlands of Semarang City in the south, directly bordering the centre of Semarang Regency, namely Ungaran Subdistrict. Etymologically, Banyumanik has a legendary story related to the tale of Nyi Ageng Pandanaran, who saw morning dew, or "*banyu*" in Javanese, on taro leaves that sparkled like "*manik-manik*" (*beads*). From this story, the term "*banyu manik*" emerged. During the Dutch East Indies period, this area became a source of coolness for the residents of Semarang City (Suryo, 1989; Yuliati, 2009).

As a comfortable area, this elderly care home was established by the CSA Brothers Congregation on 5 January 2009 on land that was once the site of a private school. Institutionally, this activity is under the Mardiwijana Foundation, with the underlying goal of addressing the realities of society concerning health, the environment, and community life, which have an impact on improving the social life

of the elderly (Hariyadi, 19/09/2022). According to the leadership of the Mardiwijana Foundation, this social ideal stems from the reality of society regarding life expectancy for the elderly. In 1990, life expectancy was 59.8 years, and in 2020, according to experts, it is projected to be 71.7 years (Hariyadi, 19/09/2022).

Therefore, the establishment of this home for the elderly plays a significant role in the psychological well-being of the elderly who feel lonely, which in sociological terms is referred to as *social dysfunction*. Inclusively, this beautiful retirement home not only accommodates those who reside in Semarang or Central Java, but many elderly groups who occupy this retirement home come from other major cities in Java, such as Jakarta, Tangerang, Bandung and Surabaya (Irwan, 2025).

2. Oral History, Deep Talk and Humanity

As explained in the previous subsection All activities were carried out by lecturers and students of the Department of History over a period of several weeks in 2025. The writing and documentation of the elderly residents' memories were carried out in a participatory manner, involving the foundation's management through interactive interviews. This activity was carried out in three stages. First, on 15 September 2025, we held an initial dialogue with the foundation's management and village officials. Second, on 4 October 2025, the community service team conducted data observation of the elderly at Wisma Asri, Banyumanik. Finally, on 17 October 2025, our community service team provided assistance in writing and interviewing the elderly as a step towards preserving oral historical heritage organised by the Wisma Lansia Asri Foundation. The process was then concluded with the documentation of important figures associated with the culture of Semarang City. This activity stimulated the participants' thinking, desire, and ability to conduct historical research using an interdisciplinary approach, fostering a deeper understanding of the past and its relevance to the present.

Although there is no systematic framework for understanding social behaviour in specific historical interviews, never simplify human behaviour. Interviewers place

individuals and groups in a broader context that influences each other both directly and indirectly. *Secondly*, reflectively, that is, being aware of the impact and dimensions of the personal experiences of the historian as well as their ethical, social and accountability values. And *thirdly*, we as observers or interviewers are responsible for the methods used and the knowledge claimed, that the subject is not at a neutral point free of values, but is part of social actions and events (Clifford, 1995; Kartodirdjo, 1992).

The results of oral history interviews with one of the elderly residents of Wisma Asri, Mr Irwan, show that the personal memories of the elderly contain significant social and cultural historical elements. He recalls his teenage years in the 1960s in Ungaran, when people's lives were still dependent on agriculture, until the urban transformation of Semarang in the 1990s. The themes that emerged included social change, community solidarity, and Javanese moral values (Irwan, 2025). The reminiscence activity helped the informant rearrange his identity and foster pride in his life journey. From a historical perspective, this data becomes a source of oral history that enriches the local narrative of Semarang. In addition, this activity provides social benefits in the form of increasing the spirit of life for the elderly and strengthening social interaction in the nursing home environment. Thus, oral history functions not only as an academic method but also as a medium of social and emotional empowerment for the elderly (Portelli, 2018).

The methodologies of history, anthropology, and auxiliary historical sciences such as civic education are essential for this service. These three sciences are linearly useful as analytical tools for students in improving their research skills, which can be developed to enhance the intellectualism of the research team, especially in the field of social humanities (Kristian, 2023) (Gilbert, 1971).

3. Psychosocial and Oral History

The historical figures here and also the process of remembering memories (resimence) from Mr Irwan are quite profound, even to the point of sadness about his

past. He recounts how his family, who are of Chinese ethnicity, have always been discriminated against over the years. The most memorable period was in the lead-up to the events of 1965, when many of his relatives moved abroad to protect themselves, but he chose to stay and work professionally in Jakarta. However, in this big city, he faced a major challenge during the events of 1998, when there was a huge anti-Chinese sentiment, which made him feel unsafe working in Jakarta with his wife for decades (Rizkinta, 2025). This phenomenon occurred frequently in major cities such as Jakarta, Tangerang, and other metropolitan areas at that time (Rizal, 2021). However, his psychological strength and that of his wife enabled his family to survive the pressures of that period (Irwan, 2025).

The above examples demonstrate the need for greater awareness of the potential of oral history approaches guided by anti-oppression perspectives. One of the reasons mentioned above is that understanding the multi-layered nature of the lives of oppressed individuals requires a multidisciplinary approach. This is in line with both the tendency of oral history to cross disciplinary boundaries (Sibarani, 2012), and the need for social assessment to be able to apply sociological and psychological insights within a historical framework. However, this approach means that there needs to be a review of how psychology in particular can be integrated into it (Clifford, 1995).

Today, psychology has been criticised for its failure to place its explanations in a general social and historical context, and especially for its reluctance to address issues of power and gender (Maynes, 2009). A typical example of this criticism is discussed by Gilligan in her discussion of the eight stages of psychosocial development. Erikson has long been used as a standard reference by human service professionals, as he provides an easily understandable concept of psychological development that can be used to assess individuals. His ideas are often cited in contemporary social assessments as justification for the emphasis on developmental psychology (Mary Jo Maynes, 2008). The following image illustrates the

interviewee's expression of happiness while describing their reminiscence album (memories).

Figure 2
The Narrator Explains Photos from Their Family Memory Album



Elderly informants view normal psychological development from childhood to adulthood as a process through various stages, involving the resolution of psychological tensions by individuals at these stages as the basis for healthy maturation. For example, the early tensions of childhood are seen as basic trust versus mistrust, while the tensions of old age are ego integrity versus despair. However, as Gilligan points out, Erikson's theory of psychological development is based on male-oriented norms, regardless of the different social conditions among various social groups, which fundamentally influence psychological development (Clifford, 1995; Portelli, 2018).

Figure 3
Author Documenting Family Albums



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Seeing the issue of sensitivity towards ethnicity in Indonesia in the past, he wanted to convey the message that peace between ethnic groups needed to be strengthened (Irwan, 2025). In a historical psychological approach, the boundaries of the discipline of psychology connect social psychological variables with specific social, political, and economic oppression (Gilbert, 1971; Sibarani, 2012). This is directly related to this paper's focus on social assessment conducted in the context of specific social and historical power and domination relationships, so that psychological interpretations of development throughout the life cycle must be placed in this context and not presented as part of a separate 'expert' discipline. Both anti-oppressive social assessment and oral history will benefit from a critical interpretation of psychology that is capable of integrating with a sociological understanding of biographical situations (Kartodirdjo, 1992).

D. Conclusion

The assistance in writing oral history and reminiscence serves to strengthen the narrator's memories and can be used as psychotherapy. The interview research approach not only reveals past events but also provides a valuable experience that motivates the narrator to continue living to this day.

This community service activity also succeeded in increasing the managers' awareness of the elderly diaspora group with a marginalised historical background. Both the author and the informants gained a better understanding of the value of a person's life struggles, and as a follow-up to this observation activity, we and the

managers attempted to write down the stories of several elderly people as a psychosocial measure to remember the past.

The difficulty we encountered was how to convey to the managers and elderly people the importance of sharing their life stories in greater depth. Physical limitations and trauma from certain past social events meant that some elderly people were reluctant to engage in in-depth interviews with us.

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